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A Process of Restoration

A Process of Restoration: Developing More Authentic Leaders through Executive Coaching

LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT TRACK

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Summary

This paper highlights the demanding nature of the leader role and illustrates the challenges surrounding the extant leader development literature, acknowledging the calls to understand *'how'* to develop leaders. The paper extends understandings through the findings from a Doctoral research study, which adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to interpret the experiences of senior leaders engaged in an authentic leader development process, through the vehicle of executive coaching. This paper outlines the creation of a unique integrated Authentic Leader Development framework (iALD), incorporating executive coaching and an approach to authentic leader development, underpinned by five stages which reflect a development process for leaders. The findings suggest a deep internal personal journey of discovery, enabling leaders to feel more confident, authentic and reflective, leading to the development of an actual process, and thus enhancing understandings of the *'how'*.

Introduction

This paper aims to draw attention to the challenges facing leaders in their role and the resulting impact upon leaders' sense of self. As a consequence, the paper analyses the literature surrounding leader development and authentic leader development in particular, sharing the research findings from a Doctoral study exploring the lived experiences and understandings of senior leaders who have engaged in an authentic leader development process through the vehicle of executive coaching. The research illustrates 'how' leaders actually develop through a process of authentic leader development (referred to as the iALD process).

The Leader Context

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) acknowledge the common discourse surrounding leaders and leadership, highlighting the core role leaders are perceived to play in identifying direction, setting strategy and visioning for the future. However, leaders face escalating demands, continually observed in their roles and subject to increasing levels of scrutiny. In a wider context, leaders are currently in the midst of escalating pressures to respond to the unknown, lead in relation to complex systems and conflicting requirements amidst expectations to create a more coherent sense of self, whilst remaining true to one's self at work, (Gardner *et al.*, 2005; Sveningsson and Larson, 2006; Burke, 2002). This bombardment can lead to confusion and despair in relation to whom to be. These multiple and diverse pressures challenge the skills, knowledge and in particular resilience of leaders but more importantly, test the very sense of self. As a result, many leaders feel compelled to “*cultivate their personas to engender confidence among stakeholders*” (Sinclair, 2011, p.509).

Authentic Leader Development

Avolio and Gardner (2005) highlight the problematic nature of the last 100 years of leadership research, claiming its failure to consider the core personal processes that result in the development of leaders. Day, Harrison and Halpin (2008) emphasize the absence of “any form of a comprehensive theory of leader development” (p.xi), supported by Avolio and Hannah, (2008) and Quick and Nelson (2008) call for a more integrative model of leader development, signaling a move away from the traditional focus on competencies and skills, to the whole development of the person as a leader, in particular self- awareness, noting the work of Avolio, (2005) and (2007).

Lord and Hall (2005) acknowledge the lack of theory and empirical research regarding the deeper, slower development of leaders, in particular theory that explores how deeper structures of self and behaviours can be changed. This is echoed by Ladkin and Taylor (2010) who draw attention to the limited leadership theory and empirical research regarding the slower development of *leaders*, particularly in relation to how surface features, which they refer to as behaviours and deeper structures involving more abstract concepts, can be changed and developed. McDougal (1985) comments on the lack of understanding relating to the leaders' “inner theatre” and scholars argue the existing

frameworks are not sufficient for developing *leaders* of the future, (e.g., Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May and Walumba, 2005; Ilies, Morgeson and Nahrgang, 2005; Walumba, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing and Peterson, 2008; Brown and Starkey, 2000). The leader context and the nature of current perspectives highlights the need to conduct research to develop frameworks and processes that focus on the deeper development of the whole person, discovering the more authentic self, building resilience to address the increasingly challenging contexts leaders find themselves in.

An approach that focuses upon the whole person as a *leader* is the authentic leadership development process (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May and Walumba, 2005). The notion of 'Authentic Leadership' has steadily emerged over the last 10 years. Re-energized initially by Luthans and Avolio (2003) as a response to the concerns relating to the ethical conduct of leaders, claiming authentic leadership is required to navigate through contemporary times, where the environment is unstable and the points of navigation ever changing. Authentic leaders are described as being transparent, values driven, deeply self aware, having self knowledge, and an ability to be self-reflecting alongside the ability to be self regulating (behaviours) (e.g., Kernis, 2003; Sparrowe, 2005; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Michie and Gooty, 2005; Harter, 2002; Gardner *et al.*, 2005; Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Day, 2000; George, 2003; Cooper, Scandura and Schriesheim 2005). Gardner *et al's.*, (2005) framework of authentic leader and follower development, claims leaders achieve authenticity through "self-awareness, self acceptance, authentic actions and relationships" (p.345). However the framework is rather speculative and somewhat naïve and overlooks the importance of the existentialist perspective in the development of authenticity.

The study also considers the philosophy of Heidegger (1962) and the impact of society upon our ability to be more authentic, referring in particular to two structures: Being the 'They' and Being an 'Authentic Self'. In being 'the They', much of what we do is "average everydayness", enculturation into the norms and expectations of a particular aspect of society, "proximally and for the most part alongside the 'world' of [our] concern, lost in the publicness of 'the They'....fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self" (Heidegger, 1962, p.220). He suggests authenticity is also constrained by "thrown-ness", a notion that people are thrown into a world not of their making, a world they didn't construct, living in the midst of environments they have little control over. As such, people's behaviours are prescribed by the social environment. 'Theyness' for the most part constrains our possibilities of existence, suggesting conformity or in-authenticity as a result. We will remain absorbed in 'the They' for the whole of our lives unless we discover '*how*' to become more authentic.

Despite the interest surrounding authentic leadership in the academic and practitioner literature, multiple conceptualizations of the notion have emerged over the last 10 years, leading to conceptual confusion around strategies for authentic leadership and leader development (Popper and Maysless, 2007; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, Dickens, 2011; Ford and Harding, 2011).

Executive Coaching

An alternative vehicle of leader development is present in the form of executive coaching, particularly the psychodynamic approach, perceived as an individualized process; a series of 1:1 interactions between an executive and an external coach, enabling the surfacing of unconscious material, self-awareness, learning, new perceptions and a more consciously engaged approach, enhancing the effectiveness of the leader and thus benefitting the organisation (e.g., Sherman and Freas, 2004; Kampa and White, 2002; Carey, Philippon and Cummings, 2011, Levinson, 1996; Stokes and Jolly, 2010; Peterson, 1996; Kilburg, 1996, 2000; Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002; Witherspoon and White, 1996). Kets de Vries, Korotov and Florent-Treacy (2007) acknowledge the potential of executive coaching and executive education as vehicles for leader development, yet suggest both are blighted by executive education providers and executive coaches who focus upon the obvious; what we see; the conscious elements that are largely already known to the individual, leading to rather superficial conclusions and perpetuating a rather two dimensional view of the world of work.

Given the lack of empirical work relating to the 'how' of authentic leader development, the importance of authenticity from an existentialist perspective and the lack of research surrounding the psychodynamic approach to coaching, the study explored senior leaders' experiences of an ALD executive coaching process, guided by the following research question: Looking through a lens of authentic leader development, what are the lived experiences and understandings of UK senior leaders engaged in executive coaching?

Methodology

Cooper *et al.*, (2005) suggest qualitative methods are called for alongside the development of conceptual frameworks in the field of authentic leadership to enable the refinement of descriptions. Locke (2001) suggests a need to focus on the provision of 'thick descriptions' of the lived experiences of authentic leaders. Gardner *et al.*, (2005, 2011) call for greater understandings of 'how' to develop more authentic leaders, suggesting we cannot wait for life experiences and learning from that to do it for us.

Fifteen senior leaders who had engaged in an executive coaching process that incorporated elements of authentic leader development such as life-story and self-awareness, were interviewed, seeking to understand their 'lived experiences' and 'understandings'. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was adopted, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to go beyond individual participant understandings borne out in the text, resulting in a number of super-ordinate themes, representing distinct stages of a leader development process, alongside corresponding sub themes, the latter providing a more intricate level of understanding, thus bringing the lived experiences of the participants and the interpretations of the researcher to life.

Findings

Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the research, characterizing the iALD process: 1) *Dubitation*, 2) *Excavation* 3) *Materialization* 4) *Restoration* 5) *Amalgamation*. Four of the super-ordinate themes are multi-dimensional, with a number of sub-themes attached to them. The themes conceptualize participants' experiences of the leader development process, particularly how it unfolds. The fifth relates to participants' experiences of the coach and the amalgamation of support and challenge.

The super-ordinate theme of '*Dubitation*' captures a sense of 'anxiety', 'hesitation' and 'doubt' experienced at the commencement of the *leader* development process. The ability to begin to understand what goes on beneath the surface is made possible through the second overarching super-ordinate theme, '*Excavation*'; understood as 'to reveal or extract by digging'. This super-ordinate theme captures participants' experiences of turning inwardly, which enables exploration within and leads to the unearthing and revealing of 'things'. Participants' experiences point towards a process of unearthing that permeates deep within them. Similarly, in the world of archaeology, excavation involves the removal of 'top soil', referred to as the 'digging in phase'; in essence the stratified removal of dirt enabling the exposure and discovery of artefacts. This phase of the iALD process appears to require significant mental energy. The super-ordinate theme appears to highlight penetration into the personal unconscious, retrieval of previously unknown, forgotten or hidden things, an area overlooked in the extant authentic leader development and existential literature.

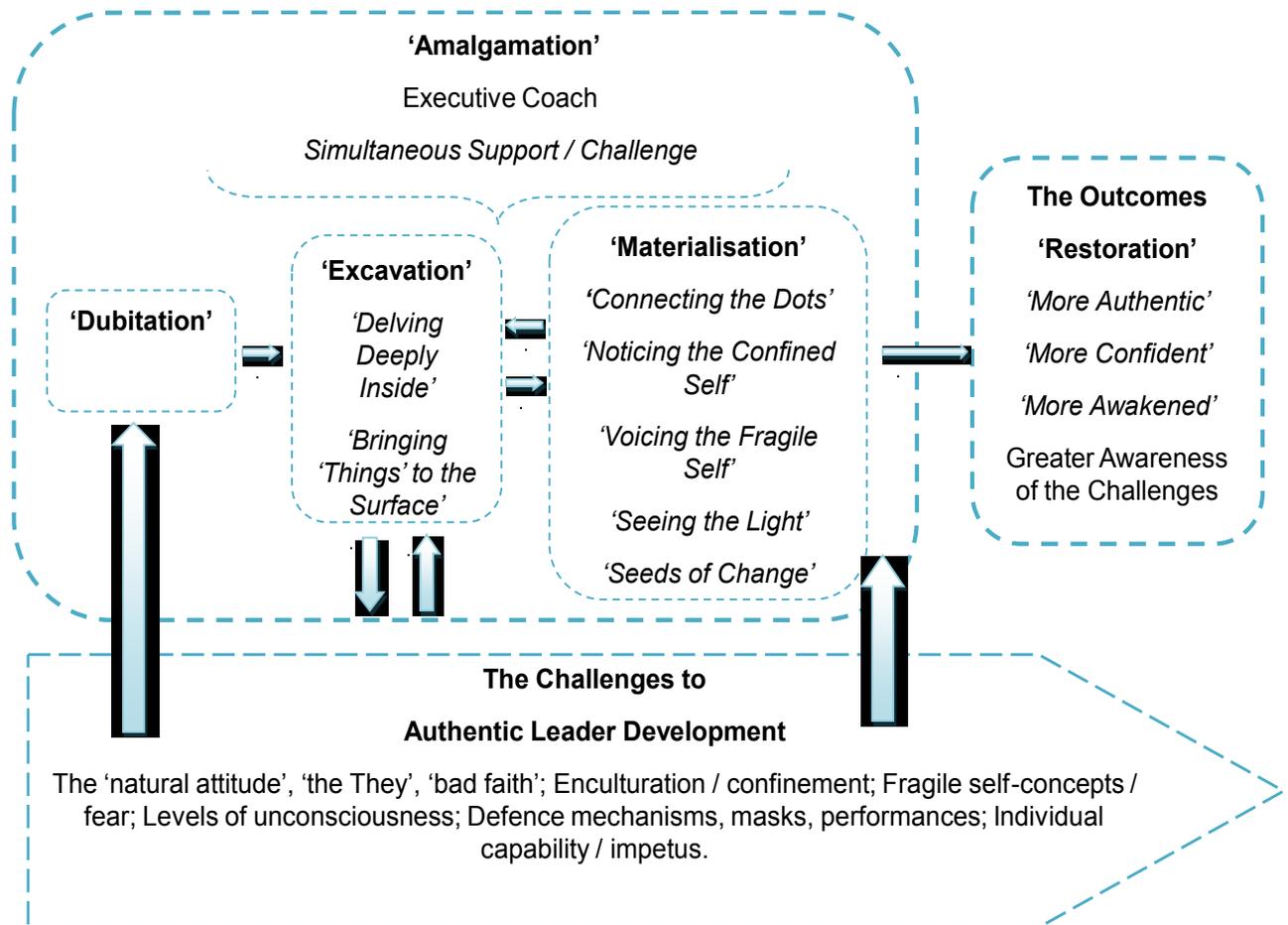
The third super-ordinate theme '*Materialization*' symbolizes the appearance of 'things', becoming 'known' for the first time, and 'things' seen from new or deeper perspectives. In carrying forward the archaeological threads introduced in the '*Excavating*' super-ordinate theme, participants in the iALD process begin to make sense of what is being brought into the light; grasping, verbalizing, seeing and understanding 'things' that were previously unknown, unfamiliar or forgotten, much akin to an archaeologist's actions in appraising their find. The findings illustrate that chinks of light emerge, illuminating 'things' that have been unconscious, taken for granted, not questioned, assumed or not known, yet now beginning to be contemplated, held and made sense of. New insights are formed primarily around four core areas; the importance of the personal life story, a confined self, a fragile self and seeing the light. This super-ordinate theme represents the outcomes from the post-excavation stage, leading to original contextual and personal understandings, new insights, creating deeper and different understandings of self, the seeds of transformational change.

From the iALD process perspective, the super-ordinate themes of '*Excavation*' and '*Materialization*' are closely connected. Participants appear to experience multiple excavations; a cyclical process of 'Delving Deeply Within', 'Bringing to the Surface' and 'Materializations'.

The '*Restoration*' super-ordinate theme describes the closing stages of the iALD process and captures participants' more inclusive and profound perspectives of self; deep and

sustained change as opposed to well meaning intentions. *'Restoration'* symbolizes a natural outcome to an archaeological process, being carefully restored in the sense that layers of sedimentation have been removed, enabling the discovery of new knowledge and understandings and a sense of being more authentic. Movement from Being 'the They' to Being an 'Authentic Self' (Heidegger, 1962), implying a self that is mine (leading a life that one feels ownership of), finding a different way of being with others such that one is not lost to 'the They'. The overall process is presented in Fig 1.1 below.

Figure 1.1 The Integrated Authentic Leader Development Process (iALD)



Conclusion

An authentic leader development process experienced through the vehicle of executive coaching and in particular a psychodynamic approach, illustrates the *'how'* and creates a profound leader development experience, where depths are scaled and personal challenges faced, leading to sustained change, arguably a more authentic, confident and reflective self, better equipped to address the increasing challenge and ambiguity leaders face in the global context.

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